THE TRACKLESS STEPPE

Treatment for a Screenplay

By BinomialSalience

Bruised purple sky. A makeshift camp of twisted bone and hide squats in a rocky gully. SRANC, pale, emaciated creatures with long limbs and jagged teeth, shuffle around a fire, gnawing on skewers of meat. Inhuman chatter like wet stones grinding.

A man, MOENGHUS (MOE-EN-GUS, 30m), beaten and bruised, sits chained to a post. Despite his injuries, he is alert. Arms cuffed behind his back, he digs his fingers into the mud and retrieves his stashed LOCK PICK. His captors pay no mind.

A Sranc lopes over to the prisoner, chewing on a skewer of meat.

“We’re going to have to nix this one,” the creature growls to its comrades. Its language is sharp, guttural, animalistic. “They never make it this long. But this one just keeps hanging on.”

“Oh let us have our fun! He barely eats anything. The man is harmless,” the skinny one says.

“No he’s not,” the leader says. “He gives me goose-pimples. It’s like he’s always watching us, even when he pretends not to.”

Moenghus listens to the Sranc discuss him in their alien tongue. He is swollen and scabbed, but there’s a spark in his blue eyes.

“Tell you what. Let’s have some *fun* with him now, then slit his throat after and be done with it,” the leader says. Wicked, sharp-toothed grins and nods.

The skinny one pads over to Moenghus, runs the flat of a rusty knife along the man’s cheek. The creature whispers in his ear. “Ohhh, that soft pink skin... I’m going to miss having my way with you.”

Moenghus meets the creature’s gaze, and says in perfect Sranc: “Perhaps I’ll bite off your cock this time.”

Bewildered looks. “He speaks our tongue?”

“Only a little. It is as you say, *Orznock*,” Moenghus breathes. “Always watching. Always listening. Even while you sleep, I’ve been plotting your death.”

“I TOLD you he was clever,” the leader barks. “Enough of this.” The creature lumbers forward, a bone knife FLASHING in his hand.

Close on Moenghus’ hands. He TWISTS the lock pick— CLICK— and the

manacles drop away. Moenghus jumps up to CATCH the blade. The man SPINS behind the creature, and jams its knife through its own throat.

Moenghus wipes the knife on his ragged tunic.
“I haven’t crossed ice and mountains only to die here.”

The other Sranc draw their weapons, shocked but quick to recover. Moenghus, gripping the knife, flashes a weary grin at the creatures encircling him.

Bloodthirsty, snarling faces close in around him, blades flashing. The circle grows tighter and tighter until...

The Sranc freeze. “Do you smell that?” one asks. A sniff.

“Horses.”

The ground RUMBLES with thundering hooves, approaching fast. All hell breaks loose.

Huge BARBARIAN MEN on horseback BURST into the thicket. Sranc are speared and butchered— limbs severed, black blood spraying.

Moenghus, sensing in the chaos that his fortunes have shifted, scuttles back to the iron stake and LOCKS himself to the post again. Imperceptible smile.

After the slaughter. The smoke clears and we see a teenage barbarian boy, CNAIUR (nay-your, 17) milling through the camp’s smoldering remains. Sunburnt, powerful but boyish, Cnaiur brushes back his long black hair and kicks a dead sranc.

“How many did you kill?” a voice barks from behind. Cnaiur looks back to see his FATHER SKIOTHA, CHIEFTAIN of the Utemot, approach. The chieftain is a terrifying brute, swaddled in bearskin and golden bangles. Everything about the barbarian screams *violence.*

“I—I cornered one. But Maluti got to him first,” Cnaiur says, eyes downward.

Skiotha stops. His eye twitches. “My son...couldn’t even kill a sranc?”

“Most were dead before I even joined the battle!” Cnaiur says, defensive. A withering look from his father. Cnaiur stares at his feet.

“How many summers are you, boy? Eighteen?” Skiotha says.

“Seventeen,” Cnaiur mumbles.

“Maybe you’re a runt after all. When I was your age, I’d already killed half a dozen men.” Skiotha points at the crosshatch scars along his forearm: one for each man killed. “You’ve hardly hardly killed a deer.”

Skiotha looks Cnaiur up and down.
“If a man is to be chieftain, he must make a FIRE in his soul! A blaze so great and so hot that men have no choice but to kneel before it. But you boy? **You have no fire.** Your wood is wet.”

Skiotha spits on the dirt. Close on Cnaiur, face set against his father’s crushing words.

“*Don’t* disappoint me again, boy,” Skiotha growls to his son.

Alone, Cnaiur mills further into the smoking sranc camp. He freezes, sensing eyes upon him, and whirls to find MOENGHUS, chained to his pole, watching Cnaiur silently.

“Please...” Moenghus croaks, his voice different now. “Free me. The key...”

Cnaiur gawks at the prisoner, considering whether to help the man. The boy lifts the key from a wooden peg, kneels, and frees the prisoner. Moenghus tries to rise, but collapses in apparent exhaustion. The other warriors carry him away.

Later. Cnaiur and the other warriors ride their horses back to camp in a rough line. Skiotha leads the pack, a bundle of fresh sranc scalps dangling from his hip. Moenghus walks alongside the train, his wrists bound and leashed to Skiotha’s horse.

Cnaiur bobs in his saddle, glum.
“Uncle. What will happen to that man?”

Close on Moenghus, ambling behind Skiotha. The chieftain YANKS his leash.

“Another of your father’s slaves. He’ll work the pasture with the rest,” says Uncle Banuit (BAN-OOT, 30).

“I thought the Sranc never took prisoners.”

“Oh they do,” says Banuit. “But so few survive the ordeal. The torment this man has seen...” Then, with a laugh, Uncle adds: “Well, let’s say he’s fallen into kinder hands now.”

Cnaiur can’t help but wonder at the prisoner, one who’d endured so much. Ahead, the prisoner TURNS over his shoulder and locks eyes with Cnaiur. Even from afar, the man’s blue eyes cut like glass.

When he can bare the man's gaze no longer, Cnaiur turns away, strangely embarrassed. They ride on.

Sound of an arrow nocking, and bowstring stretching. A horse whinnies.

Afternoon. Cnaiur stands in his saddle and draws his bow. He fires.

Cnaiur's arrow MISSES the straw target further down the range, landing far to the left. Horseback archery is a delicate art, and Cnaiur clearly has a ways to go.

Brow furrowed in concentration, Cnaiur spits and draws another arrow back to his ear. His horse shifts beneath him: he wobbles but recovers. He aims, and his mind goes quiet. 3..2..1..

TWANG. The arrow embeds itself on the far right edge of the target. Something is clicking — he's getting closer.

Standing tall on his horse, Cnaiur draws a final time. He dials in his target and the world falls away. 3..2..1..

"Oh little Nayu!" a shrill voice calls.

Cnaiur's concentration breaks— the arrow flies wide and misses the target entirely. He spins to face his interruptor, furious.

A smirking boy, MALUTI (MAY-LEW-TI, 17) flies over the hill on horseback towards the archery range. Maluti stands in his saddle, DRAWS his bow, aims, and SHOOTS at Cnaiur's target. THUNK. A near bullseye. Showoff.

Cnaiur growls at Maluti as he approaches. Cnaiur's horse spooks at the commotion. The mare kicks up and THROWS Cnaiur to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. Pain and disorientation.

Maluti trots to a halt over Cnaiur rolling in pain. Other boys on horseback join the circle: Cnaiur's peers looking down on him as he struggles to his feet. Someone snickers.

Cnaiur rises and shouts to Maluti. "Have you no respect, fool? I'm trying to practice."

"Of course. With a bow arm like that, Cnaiur needs all the help he can get," Maluti sneers. "I heard that you disappointed Skiotha again. You're stain on his legacy, aren't you Cnaiur? We're all just waiting for you to die."

The boys snicker. Maluti goes on. "Isn't that right boys? Everyone knows I would make a better chieftain than this weakling

ever could."

Cnaiur gathers himself, squints up at Maluti.

Maluti leans forward in his saddle.
"Run along little Nayu. Practice somewhere else."

Defeated, Cnaiur gathers the reins, and turns to leave. A pause—
Cnaiur makes up his mind.

While the boys chuckle, Cnaiur stomps up to Maluti, grabs him roughly by the leg, and PULLS the boy from his horse. Cnaiur POUNCES on him.

"You DARE disrespect me?" Cnaiur cries.
The two boys struggle, striking and rolling across the grass. Cnaiur flails for purchase. Pulling his hands free, Maluti HEAD BUTTS Cnaiur in the face. Blood flies. Maluti wails on Cnaiur, over and over and over.

Cnaiur's head lolls. Maluti rises heaving over his bloody rival.

"He can't shoot a bow, and now I guess Nayu can't *fight* either," Maluti grimaces. He spits on Cnaiur.

Cnaiur slumps back, dirty and bloodied. Defeated.

Evening. Cnaiur sits stares into a bonfire, vacant. Drums pulse somewhere in the distance. Uncle Banuit takes a seat on the log next to him.

"They are ready for you" Banuit says. Cnaiur merely stares.

"Cnaiur... I know my brother can be hard to you," Banuit says.
"He was hard on me too."

"He hates me," Cnaiur says.

"Rubbish. He merely wants to see your *strength*. Stand up to him. Show him your fire."

Cnaiur shakes his head, but says nothing.

"Here, I have something for you," Banuit says. With the flick of a knife, he cuts a woven HORSEHAIR BRACELET from his wrist and tosses it to Cnaiur, who examines it.

"It was taken from the stallion Ushuk, who carried your grandfather in a hundred battles. Wear it, Cnaiur, and let it give you the strength of the Utemot."

Banuit stands and beckons to Cnaiur.

“Now,” he says. “The ceremony is about to begin.”

Fireside. A wordless ceremony: Cnaiur’s right of passage.

Skiotha dips his thumb into a bowl of lambs blood and paints Cnaiur’s face. Drums pound in time. Nervous, Cnaiur looks to his father for approval, but finds nothing in his eyes.

Face painted, Cnaiur closes his eyes. Feverous drums rise and rise until...

BLACK NIGHT. Distant sounds pierce the dark. A wolf growling. Snarling. Snapping. A boy’s breathing. Grunts of effort. A panicked shout. Scuffling. Gurgling. CRACKING.

Silence.

Bit by bit, Cnaiur’s figure emerges from the inky darkness. He looks like hell. One hand clutches a bloody WOLF’S HEAD; the other grasps at a sticky wound pouring blood from his shoulder. He staggers side to side, wheezing and muttering, making his way towards the glowing fires of camp.

Cnaiur stumbles into camp, makes for his tent. Only yards from the entrance of his yatch, Cnaiur’s LEGS GIVE OUT. He rolls to the earth. Blood bubbles from the gash on his arm. The world swims, and he cannot get up.

Scared and exhausted and hurt, Cnaiur weeps into the dirt.

From nowhere, a calming hand touches his face. Sudden warmth. Cnaiur opens his eyes and sees the blue-eyed slave, Moenghus, crouched over him.

“Shhh. Hush my lamb. Shhh...” the man whispers to him, caressing his face. Cnaiur’s hitching sobs slow.

“You...” Cnaiur croaks. “You’re my father’s slave...? The Sranc prisoner...”

The blue-eyed man hushes him again. He tears a strip from his robes to tend Cnaiur’s wounds. Cnaiur’s panting begins to steady.

Without looking up from his task, the slave whispers to Cnaiur. “It is done. You have killed the wolf.”

Wincing, Cnaiur thrusts the man’s hands aside. “Father will be angry... it wasn’t right. Nothing happened as it should....”

“And yet,” the slave says, “you have killed the wolf. That is all that matters.”

“I... killed the wolf.” The slave is right. Delirium washes over him. Cnaiur breathes a sigh, and the world goes black.

The next day.

Cnaiur sits in his saddle at the shooting range, sporting a grey wolf fur cloak. He looks at his wrist, the horsehair bracelet, then to the target beyond. He is battered from the trial, but simmering with a confidence we haven’t seen yet.

Cnaiur stands atop his horse and draws his bow— TWANG...THUNK. A nice shot. Cnaiur smiles, winces.

A few days pass.

Evening. In the faint light of his dying fire, Cnaiur sits up in his bed of animal furs, shirtless. Wincing, he unwraps the bandage at his shoulder. The wound looks... better. Cnaiur massages his achy arms and yawns.

A shadow slips into Cnaiur’s tent. Blue eyes flash in the dark.

“My lord” Moenghus says, bowing. “I came to see how you fared.”

Cnaiur frowns — this sort of visit wasn’t typical.

“My bow arm works fine, thanks to you,” Cnaiur says. A pause. “You’re a bold slave, aren’t you? Sneaking in here.”

Moenghus lowers his head. “I meant no offense. To help the great ones is the only reward I desire. And you, m’lord, are perhaps the greatest among them.”

Cnaiur scoffs. “And you think I’m the greatest? Many would disagree.”

“I *know*. I’ve watched you, Cnaiur. I’ve seen the strength in your heart, your cunning, your courage,” Moenghus says, the adds: “*Cnaiur urs Skiotha.* It is a powerful name, is it not?”

An incredulous laugh from Cnaiur.
“First you steal into my tent. Then you name me. What game do you play? Why have you come, slave?”

Moenghus raises his piercing gaze.
“Because you, Cnaiur urs Skiotha, are more than your kinsmen,” Moenghus says. “Because you alone can hear what I’ve to say. You alone.”

The words *you alone* hang in the silence. Cnaiur looks on warily.

“If I were to cry out, a dozen warriors would be here in a heartbeat.”

“But my lord. If you want me gone, simply say the word.”

Cnaiur pauses. His curiosity gets the better of him. “Alright. Speak.”

“I have a question, lord,” Moenghus says. “Have you ever felt that your life is but a dream? That you are but a sleepwalker?”

Cnaiur says nothing. The servant goes on.

“*I see you, Cnaiur*. I see your devotion and your heartbreak and your rage. You lash and howl like a wolf of the steppe, convinced that your anger is proof of your agency. But you, slumber, as all men do. I can see it in your face this waking moment — a man who follows blindly the tracks laid for him and calls them his own.”

“I am no dreamer, slave,” Cnaiur bristles. “I live my life as I will it.”

Moenghus sits beside the dying fire, thoughtful.

“When the warriors raid the Empire across the mountains, they always use the same trails, do they not?” the slave asks.

“Yes. Of course.”

“But why?”

Cnaiur shrugs. “Because the trails are passes carved into the mountain. There’s no other way to cross into the Empire.”

Moenghus nods. “And when the Utemot gather to raid their neighbors’ pastures, they always use the same trails, do they not?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Moenghus’ piercing eyes.

“Because they ride across open ground,” Cnaiur says. “The ways of crossing the Steppe are without number.”

“Exactly!” Moenghus exclaims. “And is not every task like a journey? Is not every accomplishment a destination? Every hunger of the soul a point of departure?”

“I suppose...The memorialists say as much.”

“Then the memorialists are wise.”

“Make your point, slave.”

Moenghus laughs. “Do you see, Cnaiur? You grow impatient because you think the path I take too convoluted! Even words are like journeys.”

Cnaiur stares at the slave, puzzled. Moenghus goes on.

“So if all things men do are journeys, then the ways of the Scylvendi are carved like stone into mountain passes. Why do you ride the same trails, over and over again, when the ways to your destination are without number?”

Dawning realization for Cnaiur.
“You’re saying that I walk a path have made for me, believing it my own?”

Moenghus nods. Cnaiur glances down at the **horsehair bracelet** on his wrist.

“Who are you?” Cnaiur asks.

“My name is Moenghus. I am only a simple monk, lost a very long way from home,” he says. “You saved me, Cnaiur. I owe you a great debt.”

Moenghus sits beside Cnaiur in his bed. Intimate. Cnaiur watches the man approach, speechless.

Moenghus’s voice softens, looks into Cnaiur’s eyes.

“Perhaps, if you wish, I might stir you from your slumber,” Moenghus says. “Perhaps, I can show you the way of the trackless Steppe.”

Cnaiur rides his mare across the steppe. His childhood friend Durna (DUR-NA, 17) bobs beside him. Fresh, warm air tussles the boys’ long hair out behind them. Simplicity. Freedom. The boys race across the grassland.

The boys dismount beside a gurgling river. Cnaiur ties his horse and DIVES into the water, emerging with a grin. Durna shakes his head.

“I swear, you are the biggest fool in the tribe.” Durna smirks.

Cnaiur’s smile widens. He shrugs.

“*Joy rides the wind, not still air*,” Cnaiur offers.

Durna tosses him a fishing spear.

Cnaiur frowns. “And yet, sometimes the wind falters. I guess we should do what we came here for.”

Hours later. Cnaiur and his friend have fished for hours and struck it gold. Each carries a large basket filled nearly to the brim with pike and herring.

Cnaiur puts a hand on Durna’s shoulder and makes for his horse, but Durna stays behind a moment. The boy takes a fish from his basket, a handsome long spotted pike, and places it gently on the rocks. Then, squatting down, Durna bows in quick prayer.

Cnaiur raises an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“My father told me to make an offering to the dead god today on his behalf.” Durna stands up. “Offering my best catch is as good as any tribute.”

Cnaiur is skeptical, even annoyed. He gestures to the rock perch where the fish lay. “*Lokung* needs no fish — he is dead! You would waste our food when winter is only months away?”

Defensive, Durna shrugs. “It’s my catch. I’ll do what I wish.”

Cnaiur says it isn’t practical, but Durna ignores him and fetches the horses.

Cnaiur lingers at the stream a moment, his face creased in thought. *Such needless waste. Is this what Moenghus spoke of? A man like Durna, a slave to custom, bound to walk the beaten paths of tradition. Am I any different?*

Evening in the Utemot Camp. A horse whinnies.

A scruffy WATCHMAN squats around his fire. He glances at the horses, takes another bite of rabbit, and then gulps from his cup.

Cnaiur approaches the fire and leads beside the watchman.
“You are dismissed. Father says I’m to watch the horses tonight.”

“Did he now?” the guard asks. “And when did he say that?”

“Just now. You know how my father can be.”

“That’s funny,” the guard says between chews. “I heard Skiotha rode south this morning.”

Anger flares in Cnaiur’s eyes.
“How do you like your nose, fool? Broken or unbroken? As ugly as you are, I could always make you uglier.”

“Unbroken!” the watchman shoots to his feet. “Of course, lord. It’s no problem. Really.”

Cnaiur smiles at the man’s panic. Cnaiur’s eyes flit to the horn of booze shaking in the man’s hand: fermented mare’s milk.

“And I’ll take your cup too.”

Moenghus and Cnaiur talk in the half-light beyond the fire. Cnaiur laughs at something Moenghus says. Moenghus smiles shyly.

Cnaiur sips his booze, works up his courage.
“Tell me of your homeland, Moenghus. Tell me of these *Dunyain*.”

Thoughtful, Moenghus explains that the Dunyain were refugees who escaped the First Apocalypse when the No-God rose and fell, almost two-thousand years ago.

“We are guides and trackers, students of logic, seekers of the Shortest Path. Of all the world, we alone have awakened from the dread slumber of custom,” he said. “We alone.”

Cnaiur’s eyes twinkle watching Moenghus speak. He passes the horn to Moenghus, who sips.

“It must be terribly difficult, Cnaiur. The burden you bear.”

“What burden?” Cnaiur asks.

“That you are the chieftain’s son. I’ve seen the way Skiotha treats you.”

Cnaiur’s smile drops. He stares into the black.

“He is harsh on me, my father. He pushes me to be something better, in his own way. But sometimes...sometimes I think he only wants to step on me, subject me to the same torture his father did to him.”

“Skiotha is punishing you,” Moenghus says.

Cnaiur hesitates, then nods.

Moenghus touches Cnaiur’s arm.
“Remember Cnaiur: you stand above the others. You are not your father. You shape your own destiny.”

Cnaiur chews on this. *I am not my father.*

Moenghus moves in closer to Cnaiur, his eyes soft and wet like his lips.
“I have a lesson for you, my student. Will you listen?”

Moenghus runs a finger along Cnaiur's collarbone. The boy flinches, but only for a heartbeat.

"I ask you: is it a sin for me to touch you thus?" Moenghus asks. "Why? What mountain pass have we strayed from?"

"None..." Cnaiur breathless.

"Why?" Moenghus locks eyes with Cnaiur.

"Because," says Cnaiur. "We ride trackless ground..."

Hot breath. Cnaiur leans into Moenghus until their lips brush. When Cnaiur can stand it no longer, he pulls Moenghus into him. They kiss.

Moenghus stops a moment, looks into Cnaiur's glazed eyes.

"Tell me, Chieftain's-son." Moenghus rubs a thumb along Cnaiur's shoulder. "What do you desire before all things? What circumstance? Tell me, one who is awake, and I will show you the trail you must follow."

Close on Cnaiur's dreamy, distant expression.
"I wish..." he stammers. "I wish to become a great Chieftain of The People."

"Good," says Moenghus. "Then we shall ride together, you and I, across the open Steppe. I shall show you a track like no other."

The fire fades out as their silhouettes embrace.

Later that night. Cnaiur struts back towards his tent, grinning.

Sudden COMMOTION on the other side of camp.

"Don't let him get away!"
Another voice. "Intruder! Intruder!"
There's an *enemy* somewhere in the camp.

Hairs rise on the back of Cnaiur's neck. What should he *do*? Eyes darting, Cnaiur pulls free a wooden support pole, and RUNS toward the shouts.

Somewhere, a woman screams. Cnaiur leaps up onto a wooden cart to get a better vantage. Ahead, the intruder BOLTS between tents, his head bobbing up and down.

Cnaiur sprints to head him off. He crouches beside a tent, raises his club to strike.

Whirring footsteps, fast approaching. The intruder turns the corner and— WHAM! Cnaiur knocks the intruder HARD to the earth.

Cnaiur whistles to the others, looking curiously down at the writhing man. The other warriors gather around him.

Skiotha materializes in their midst. “Tie him up.”

Hours later. The intruder slumps forward against his restraints, his bloody face orange in the firelight. Cnaiur stands silently beside Skiotha, mirroring his father’s posture: mouth tight, arms folded. Neither speaks.

After a time, Banuit, Cnaiur’s uncle, returns.

“He is Kuoti. Sent in the dead of night to steal our livestock,” Banuit says, wiping blood from his hands. “He wouldn’t talk at first, but I’m persistent. Now he’s singing like a bird.”

Skiotha curses. “Kuoti jackals. Are there others?”

Banuit shakes his head. “Just this one. They were testing our security I think.” Skiotha chews on this a moment.

Skiotha regards his son a moment. Skiotha grabs Cnaiur by the wrist and yanks his arm into the firelight. Cnaiur won’t resist.

“Look here, brother,” Skiotha says to Banuit. “The boy still bears no *swazond*.”

Swazond, the ceremonial scars that mark the killing of another. Skiotha’s arms are banded with them, almost uncountable. Cnaiur’s arms are bare.

Skiotha eyes his son. “How many summers are you boy? He’s a late bloomer I think, this one.”

Cnaiur stares down. “I told you. Seventeen,” he says meekly. Skiotha ignores him.

“Do you know the meaning of the *Swazond, boy*?” Skiotha points to the lateral scars covering the chieftain’s huge forearms.

Cnaiur gulps. “We cut our arms to mark the killing of another. The scars are like trophies, to celebrate the taking of a life.”

Skiotha shoots his brother a look, shakes his head.
“The boy doesn’t understand. But he will.”

Skiotha draws a glistening KNIFE, and presses the bone hilt into the boy’s hand.

“Kill the prisoner,” Skiotha says.

Kill the prisoner. A command. Cnaiur looks to Banuit, pleading, but he knows he has no choice. Besides, *he wants this, doesn’t he?*

Skiotha leans over, whispers in Cnaiur’s ear.
“You will not tremble. You will not weep like a woman. Do not disgrace me, boy.”

Cnaiur rises, knife in hand, and plods toward the prisoner. All eyes on him. The prisoner, gagged, lolls his head— his eyes widen. *This boy means to kill me.*

Cnaiur IS trembling. Barely concealed tears well behind his eyes. He does not want to kill this man. And he knows he must.

At the far edge of firelight, **Moenghus watches from the shadows**. The slave nods to Cnaiur. It gives him courage.

Cnaiur kills the prisoner.

When it’s done, Skiotha takes the knife from Cnaiur’s clenched fist. Grabbing Cnaiur’s arm, Skiotha cuts a quick vertical slash onto the boy’s forearm. Cnaiur winces.

Skiotha squats down next to his son. His threatening manner softens.

“The man you have killed is gone from the world, Cnaiur. Now, he exists only here,” Skiotha says, touching his son’s arm. “A scar upon your arm. It is the mark of his absence, of all the ways his soul will not move, and of all the acts he will not commit. A reminder that you bear his weight for the rest of your days.”

There is something vaguely approving in Skiotha’s eyes. Cnaiur, still in shock, nods.

Cnaiur squints at the line of blood welling from his forearm. His first swazond. Cnaiur stares at the blood trickling forth with horror and pride.

Slate-colored clouds swirl overhead. Uncle Banuit stands on the back of a large wooden cart, and WHISTLES with his fingers. Cnaiur and the other young warriors milling on horseback, trot over to listen.

MALUTI glares at Cnaiur from across the gathered horsemen. This time, Cnaiur glares back.

Banuit yells to the assembled. “The old crone says a storm is coming,” he says. “Gather as much firewood as you can carry and

report back here.”

The horsemen split up, and Cnaiur rides alone east under grey cloud cover. When he reaches a copse of trees, Cnaiur dismounts, gathers the dead wood he finds into a basket, then rides back toward Banuit’s cart.

Halfway there, Cnaiur checks over his shoulder and sees TWO RIDERS coming at him FAST.

“Ohhh little Nayu!” a shrill voice calls. Cnaiur slaps his horse and bolts.

Cnaiur RIDES hard, but it isn’t enough. The two horsemen, whooping and hollering, gain on him enough for him to recognize MALUTI and his CRONY. They’re trying to run him down.

As they crest a hill, the sneering crony grabs at Cnaiur. Cnaiur reacts quick, drags a log from the basket slung over his shoulder, and BEATS at his attacker. Cnaiur HURLS the log at the other boy and the force sends him tumbling off his horse.

Maluti is right on Cnaiur’s tail now. Maluti LEAPS from his horse and TACKLES Cnaiur.

Both boys go flying and land in a rolling mass. Panting, Cnaiur muscles himself on top of Maluti.

Grunting, Maluti sneers up at Cnaiur’s dangling HORSEHAIR BRACELET.
“What’s that you’ve got, Nayu? A bracelet of your mother’s arm hair?”

Maluti forces Cnaiur’s hand up and JABS him in the face. Cnaiur falls backwards, clutching his temple.

Maluti rises to his feet, panting.
“Doesn’t matter if it was blessed by the dead god himself. No trinket can save you from me, Nayu. Nothing can.”

Cnaiur presses a hand against his bloody temple. He wobbles to his knees, then to his feet. Fear turns to frustration turns to burning anger. For a moment he looks less a boy and more a man.

“I should have known a weasel like you would rather pick old scabs than actually contribute,” Cnaiur barks. He spits bloody phlegm. “But maybe you are right.”

Cnaiur TEARS THE HORSEHAIR BRACELET from his wrist. He holds out its frayed ends, as if offering it to Maluti.
“Maybe there’s no magic in this. Maybe there never was. Maybe I all I need to beat you bloody is my bare hands.”

Cnaiur pounds his chest, teeth clenched and eyes ablaze. His fire BURNS WHITE HOT. He is not afraid.
“I will BREAK you like a horse,” Cnaiur shouts. “I will make you WHIMPER and BEG before me. And when I send you home in bloody ruin, know that I will prowl your nightmares. May you never feel safe again.”

Maluti sneers, but weakly, unnerved by Cnaiur’s tone.

Cnaiur LEAPS onto Maluti like a beast. Rage and fury like we’ve never seen before. Cnaiur HOWLS and screams the pain away, and HEAVES Maluti to the earth.

Spittle flies from Cnaiur’s mouth, hurling his fists with unchecked animal fury. Rage subsumes him.

A bone-cracking fist pummels Maluti, over and over. BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM! ... MATCH CUT TO—

THUNDER CRACK. Inside the chieftain’s tent.

“BOOM!” Banuit cries to those around the fire.

“Again and again Cnaiur brought ruin down upon the boy!” Banuit says laughing. “There was a demon in his eye, I swear it. Good thing I arrived when I did, or else there would’ve been nothing left of the other boy.”

Banuit turns to Skiotha, grinning. “Brother, you say the Kuöti raid our pastures to the south? The solution is simple: send Cnaiur to sort them out!”

Cnaiur, who has an enormous black-eye, grins back at Banuit.
“I’ll give them a beating they’ll never forget, Uncle!”

But Skiotha, swaddled in the chieftain’s bearskin coat on the other side of the fire, frowns. “It would take a lot more than one skinny boy to ride down the Kuoti.”

Skiotha looks at this son.
“You beat a child. Congratulations. You’ve got a long way to go, boy.”

The grin on Cnaiur’s battered face melts into defeat.

“More drink, my master?” a familiar voice whispers in his ear.

Moenghus pours more fermented milk into Cnaiur’s horn.
“What are you doing here?” Cnaiur breathes.

Their hands touch, lingering a moment too long.
“What if the others see?”

“Be brave, my lamb,” Moenghus says.

“Now?” Cnaiur stammers. A knowing look from Moenghus.

“It is what your heart desires, is it not?”

Cnaiur is dumbstruck.

Moenghus rises and walks the edge of firelight. Cnaiur looks sick, his wide eyes darting to his father. Skiotha quaffs another drink, oblivious to the slave.

Then, MOENGHUS STEPS INTO THE FIRELIGHT.

Moenghus LOOMS tall over the crosslegged warriors. Before all, his meek posture changes. His hunched shoulders unfurl and straighten into a powerful, almost *kingly* figure.

“I would make you a wager, Chieftain of the Utemot,” Moenghus says.

Silence. All eyes on Moenghus now.

Skiotha cocks his head, his eyes heavy from drink, and returns the slave’s cold stare. The warriors look on with morbid curiosity. Cnaiur watches in horror.

The chieftain snorts at his slave’s insolence.
`“You have already made your gambit, slave. And you have *lost*.”

“But I would wager my life with you, *Skiotha*.” Someone gasps.

Skiotha grins in disbelief. “You speak my name as if you have any right to. As if you are not my property...” Skiotha says, groping through this absurdity. He forces a laugh.

So the slave continues: “I have watched you, Skiotha. And I have wondered at the measure of your strength.” A condescending smile. “Many here so wonder. Did you know this?”

Skiotha’s laughter trails. The fire wheezes.
“I have been measured, slave,” Skiotha says.

“But then, measure is not something accomplished and then forgotten,” Moenghus says. “Old measure is merely grounds for the new. Measure is unceasing.”

Close on Cnaiur, terrified yet unable to look away. Moenghus turns to the boy with imploring eyes, as if to say: *Do you*

remember your part?

“Are you afraid, father?” Cnaiur manages, his voice weak. A stinging look from Skiotha. Cnaiur lowers his gaze.

Skiotha turns back to the slave, asks with contrived indifference:
“What then is your wager, slave?”

A thunder crack. CUT TO—

Moenghus and Skiotha GRAPPLING in the rain. A FIGHT TO THE DEATH in smoky firelight. Cnaiur, drenched, watches the horror ensue.

Skiotha FLIPS Moenghus and CRUSHES him in a vice grip. Moenghus flails for purchase. Rain spatters off their bare arms.

Cnaiur cries out to his lover, not caring that the others hear. *Moenghus is going to die. I’m going to lose him.*

Moenghus slithers a hand beneath Skiotha’s iron grip. THUMP. An elbow flies and Skiotha reels back, face bloody. Like a viper, Moenghus STRIKES, leaping upon Skiotha and CHOKING him from behind.

Skiotha GURGLES in the mud. He claws and rolls, but Moenghus HANGS ON. With horror, Cnaiur watches the light fade from his father’s eyes. The boy chose this dark path, and there is nothing he can do now.

Thunderclap. Skiotha’s LIFELESS BODY falls face down in the mud. Moenghus rises, his face flushed, his expression blank.

Cnaiur rushes past his father’s LIFELESS BODY to his lover’s side. Rain drenched, Cnaiur sobs into Moenghus’s bare chest.

Cnaiur looks up into those piercing eyes.
“You are free now, Moenghus,” he says.

“Yes,” Moenghus says. “And you, little lamb, are now Chieftain of the Utemot.”

Dawn. Clouds curl and twist across a baby blue sky.

Cnaiur trails Moenghus as he walks to the far edge of camp. “You say you must go, but must you leave *now*? I cannot do this alone. I need you.”

Moenghus saddles his horse, not meeting Cnaiur’s pleading gaze. “You are strong, Cnaiur. The other warriors may challenge you. You must stoke the fire of your soul. Teach them to fear you.”

Moenghus finally looks up.
“I must go, little lamb. For me, the Utemot were but a way-station. My true path leads south: **to the Three Seas.**”

Cnaiur grimaces, tears in his eyes.
“What of our me, Moenghus? Did I mean nothing to you?”

“Circumstance favored us both, little one.” Moenghus brushes hair from Cnaiur’s eyes.

Moenghus steps into the saddle, peers down upon tiny Cnaiur. Cnaiur shivers in his father’s bearskin cloak, wipes tears from his eyes.

“Remember well what I taught you. Someday, when you’re ready, come back to me.”

Moenghus turns and rides off, leaving Cnaiur utterly ALONE. His breath comes fast, and Cnaiur squeezes the hilt of his sword so hard his knuckles go white. Grief and sorrow give way to HATRED.

SLOW ZOOM ON— Cnaiur’s battered face as he tries to process all that happened. Exhausted. Bewildered. And above all, angry. CONTINUE ZOOMING UNTIL—

TITLE CARD: 25 YEARS LATER

MATCH CUT— CNAIUR, no longer a boy but a grown man, a CHIEFTAIN of twenty-five years. A wild black mane, eyes like flint above a square-cut jaw. He is panting, gnashing his teeth. The same terrifying fury smolders behind it all.

END OF SEQUENCE

Author’s note:

This is the intro and backstory to a pivotal character in the larger narrative of The Prince of Nothing. Cnaiur will return later in this episode as an adult.

Years later the events of his childhood, Cnaiur encounters the son of Moenghus, another manipulative Dunyain monk, and becomes entangled in a great and tragic holy war destined for Shimeh, where Moenghus resides. Cnaiur’s guilt and anger still burn within, driving him to the ends of the earth to seek his revenge...